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ABSTRACT

The changing demographics in the United States have contributed to the increase of the preexisting multicultural nature of the American society. To actively participate in their meaningful civic function, individuals need to be more sensitive to the contextual demands of the communicative event as they relate to language, culture, ethnicity, and race. This will in turn reduce prejudice and promote tolerance, foster understanding and enhance communication, facilitate socialization and increase harmony, and augment appreciation of diversity in the pluralistic society. In particular, today's classrooms, as a microcosm of the whole diverse society, present teachers with the challenging task of cultivating culturally diverse communication patterns and maintaining a meaningful interaction in the learning/teaching environment. Thus teachers must be keenly aware of different interactional patterns brought in to the classroom and be sensitive to the communication styles of their students. This paper explores these issues and presents pedagogical implications for promoting an ambiance conducive to learning in culturally diverse environments. (Contains 25 references.) (Author)

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The Art of Communicating Multiculturally: Implications for Teachers

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Abstract

The changing demographics in the United States have contributed to the increase of the preexisting multicultural nature of the American society. To actively participate in their meaningful civic function, individuals need to be more sensitive to the contextual demands of the communicative event as they relate to language, culture, ethnicity, and race. This will in turn reduce prejudice and promote tolerance, foster understanding and enhance communication, facilitate socialization and increase harmony, and augment appreciation of diversity in the pluralistic society. In particular, today's classrooms, as a microcosm of the whole diverse society, present teachers with the challenging task of cultivating culturally diverse communication patterns and maintaining a meaningful interaction in the learning/teaching environment. Thus teachers must be keenly aware of different interactional patterns brought in to the classroom and be sensitive to the communication styles of their students. This paper explores these issues and presents pedagogical implications for promoting an ambiance conducive to learning in culturally diverse environments.

The Art of Communicating Multiculturally: Implications for Teachers

Introduction

Since the learner's cultural and linguistic characteristics have a significant impact on the way one communicates, teachers need to be cognizant of the uniqueness of multicultural communication patterns of diverse student populations. Therefore, teachers should be sensitive to the students' preferred socialization patterns that affect the communicative process. At the same time, students should assume responsibility in adjusting to the new demands of the communicative situation.

The role of culture is very crucial in the communicative and learning processes in diverse classrooms. Using a multicultural perspective, this paper examines the role of culturally mandated variables and their implications for teachers in diverse settings.

Culture Revisited

It is worthwhile to provide an operational definition of *culture*, because *culture* defines many interactional patterns of individuals and groups. The construct of defining culture helps us understand the unique ways in which given social and cultural groups interact.

The account given about what culture is has been debated over the years. For the most part, definitions of culture have focused on several aspects of social behaviors of individuals and groups. One of the frequently cited definitions of culture is that of the 1871 anthropologist, Edward Tylor, who defines culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (In Bennett, 1995, p. 55).

A more recent anthropological account of culture is provided by Davis (1984) who states that culture includes the shaping behavioral devices (such as language, history, rites .

. . etc.), values, beliefs, and social norms. According to Bennett (1995), recent definitions of culture focus on "shared knowledge and belief systems, rather than on habits and behavior" (p. 55). Furthermore, culture is defined as a general framework that encompasses "intellectual, moral, and aesthetic standards prevalent in a community and the meanings of communicative actions" (LeVine, 1986, in Bennet, 1995, p. 56). Although all definitions of culture are important in our understanding of the communicative interactional process, such concept is more "attuned to the definition of multicultural education as the development of multiple standards for perceiving, believing, doing and evaluating" (Bennett, 1995, p. 57).

Having this in mind, one must not confuse *the culture* with *a culture*. *The culture* is a universal faculty that helps humans develop the intellectual and moral patterns through a meaningful process of human interaction. It seems that human beings are biologically pre-equipped by these abilities that are triggered by environmental needs. The innate underlying premise of *the culture* is manifested by one's intrinsic faculties to meet physiological, psychological, and social needs as actualized in a culture. There are certain universal cultural parameters within which each culture operates (Bennett, 1990). These parameters are governed by what is considered of human value to a given group. According to Bennett (1995), universal characteristics of culture can help us understand a given culture; these characteristics range from language idiosyncrasies and family structure to cognitive knowledge and religious values, and serve as "a recipe for producing behavior, artifacts and interpretation of one's reality" (p.57).

A culture, on the other hand, is bound by relative parameters that govern the behavior of a particular group in a particular place and time. Unlike the abstract concept of the universal culture, a culture is a more concrete and realistic representation of these universal cultural patterns of interaction. In other words, it is a specific actualization of *the culture* , an actualization that varies from one group to another. For example, a culture

(C1) where members speak a given language (L1), adhere to a given religion (R1), and live by a set of values (V1) compares at the deeper level, but contrasts at the surface level with another culture (C2) having another language (L2), different religion (R2), and different set of values (V2). Much of these components such as religion, language, customs, habits, values are integral universal components of culture. The understanding of these components that are intricately related promotes our understanding of that culture. While *a culture* is concrete in its specificity as a true representation of one aspect of reality, *the culture* is an abstract construct whose understanding is only attained through multiculturalism.

Understanding these constructs pertaining to culture helps us cross the cultural boundaries in a more tolerant and harmonious manner in a culturally diverse setting. Since all cultures are equally important in meeting the intrinsic human needs, no culture is superior to another. Thus successful intercultural communication requires a global awareness of cultural expectations of individuals and groups.

Undoubtedly, the culture--whether at the home, school, or environment--is the general framework within which children socialize and interact, thus developing their preferred ways of communication. Accordingly, the relationship between the communicative process and cultural experiences should not be underscored.

The Communicative Process: A Multicultural Perspective

One of the major components of multiculturalism is promoting sensitivity to the communication patterns in culturally diverse settings. This is embedded in the definition of multicultural education proposed by Suzuki (1984), Nieto (1996), Banks (1995), and Grant (1995) who consider multiculturalism as a tool that values multiple ways of communicating in multiple learning environments, and matching the academic, social, and

linguistic needs of all students. These needs may vary widely due to differences in race, sex, ethnicity, or sociolinguistic backgrounds of the students and educators.

These researchers also outlined the philosophical underpinnings of multicultural education as an approach that enhances the development of diverse students' basic academic and interactional skills to help them develop a better understanding of their own backgrounds and of other groups in the pluralistic society. Through this process, the culture of schools needs to help students learn to respect and appreciate cultural diversity, overcome ethnocentric and prejudicial attitudes, and understand the sociohistorical, economic and psychological factors that have produced the contemporary conditions of inequality, alienation and ethnic polarization. Multicultural education should also foster students' and educators' ability to analyze critically and make intelligent decisions about real-life problems and issues through a democratic process of communication.

In addition to understanding learners and their needs, multicultural education has focused on building cultural links among participants in educational and social institutions. In particular, educators in diverse settings should celebrate and value individuals through:

1. awareness and appreciation of different experiences relevant to all minorities and other ethnic groups in the American society;

2. an understanding of the nature of the pluralistic society and its implications for the communicative process in schools;

3. creating optimal opportunities for learning by interacting multiculturally;

4. an understanding of students' attitudes, values, and other motivational forces that significantly affect the communicative process;

5. acquiring multicultural knowledge to augment the democratic spirit in classrooms so that mutual communication can take place meaningfully;

6. learning effective communication and mediation styles that are conducive to students of diverse sociocultural backgrounds;

7. utilizing multicultural competence in terms of the unique contextual demands of the communicative event.

According to Banks (1994), as in Banks (1995), one of the most fundamental dimensions of multicultural education is the knowledge construction process. It relates to "the extent to which teachers help students to understand, investigate and determine how the implicit cultural assumptions, frames of references, perspective, and biases within a discipline influence the ways in which knowledge is constructed within it" (Banks, 1994, p. 5). This dimension is also important because it closely relates to other dimensions such as reducing prejudice, empowering the school culture and social structure, equity pedagogy, and content integration. A dynamic balance between these dimensions is necessary to empower all students from diverse, racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, understanding students' characteristics, feelings, attitudes, and experiences can help both educators and teachers develop more democratic values and attitudes and become more active participants and effective multicultural mediators in the pluralistic society.

Since commonalties among peoples cannot be recognized unless differences are acknowledged (Lewis & Doorlag, 1987), educators working with diverse populations should learn about the cultural expectations of their students. To do so, they should (a) observe the interactional behavior of their students inside and outside the classroom; (b) ask their students questions about their cultural patterns of interaction; (c) get acquainted with literature dealing with these issues (Ogbu, 1995).

Communication, Learning and Culture

The relationship between learning styles and cultural experiences should not be underscored. This is embedded in various definitions of culture as an overarching

framework within which children interact and learn. Thus, culturally diverse learners have diverse ways of communicating, behaving, interacting, and learning.

Speaking of the cultures of people of color in the United States and their relation to schooling, Ogbu (1988; 1995) argues that minority students' "way of life" is not congruent with the mainstream culture at schools. In other words, the discontinuity between the students' cultures and that of schools (Irvine, 1990), has led to the conclusion that "differences among mainstream and diverse students' approaches to learning, are major contributors to the school failure of students of color" (Irvine & York, 1995, p. 489).

Thus, the intricate relationship between learning and culture must be the axiom for elucidating students' behavior. In fact, children tend to be the product of the social milieu, and the culture in which they grow largely influences and shapes their behavior (Brislin, 1993; Lustig & Koester, 1996). That is to say, culture tends to shape the child's way of life, and his/her interactional patterns. Consequently, it also influences the child's ways of learning, solving real-life problems, and accomplishing learning tasks. Accounting for these variables in learning and teaching is an integral part of successful teaching in multicultural settings (Scarcella, 1990; Seelye, 1993; Lustig & Koester, 1996).

This relationship is manifested in many ways. According to (Bennett, 1990), childhood socialization, sociocultural tightness, ecological adaptation, biological effects, and linguistic aspects are all aspects that affect learning in diverse settings. In the first place, children develop their cultural schemata based on their background experiences. That is to say, children tend to adapt to environmental stimuli and harness these schemata in the way they learn. An example is provided by Swisher & Deyhle (1989) about the Navajo children's perceptual skills necessary for ecological adaptation and survival. These skills are taught by adults and are based on the interaction of community members with the environment. Consequently, children's experiences become a vital part of their cultural schemata, and learn in a way which is conducive to their way of life.

Second, early childhood socialization patterns impact the way children learn. Children socialize in unique ways that reflect patterns and behaviors inherent in the social environment. Parenting styles culturally mandate certain behaviors and thus contribute to the development of strategies and skills essential for learning and problem solving tasks. For instance, an Arab child is brought up in a relatively restrictive and authoritative environment where dependence is hampered; thus, an Arab child learns to acquire knowledge through a heavy reliance on authentic authoritative curriculum and teachers in the classroom (Suleiman, 1993). Likewise, Bermudez (1986) documented similar observations about Hispanic children whose parents are--in the socialization process-- less likely to encourage self-dependence than Anglo parents.

Closely related to the issue is the contextual and sociocultural demands of communicative and interactional processes. According to Hall (1989), some cultures are low-context while others are high-context. Low-context cultures encourage linear thinking, and analytical reasoning. On the other hand, high-context cultures promote field-dependence learning styles given the mindset about time, social roles, logical reasoning, and social orientation. For instance, unlike the Western cultures most Middle Eastern counterparts tend to reflect low-context interactional patterns in the learning process. In a culturally diverse classroom, the gap between low and high-context interactional patterns can be bridged through teacher's awareness of these differences.

Also, given the interconnectedness between language and culture, learning is affected by the language (or form of language) the child uses in the early stages of his/her life. Linguistic variables are vital in learning styles, because thought and language patterns influence one another. Moreover, culturally-bound rhetorical patterns influence the way a child learns (Santos & Suleiman, 1991); for example, Muslim children grow up relying on accurate authentic rote memorization of verses from religious texts needed for religious rites

and rituals (Suleiman, 1993). Thus, precision and accuracy are encouraged while approximation and inference are discouraged.

In short, students come to schools reflecting diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. They also bring differences in their socialization and interactional patterns along with their value systems. Their experiences are different as they come from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Indeed, they play a significant role in shaping children's modes of learning. Since these differences "often result in cultural discontinuity or lack of cultural synchronization between the students and the school" (Irvine & York, 1995, p. 489), educational discourse should value them to maximize educational opportunities for all learners.

Guidelines for Teachers

In a culturally diverse setting, the issue of valuing communication modes requires a comprehensive approach to enhance mutual understanding through communication. Although it seems impossible to understand interactional orientation of all students, cultural conflicts in the classroom can be reduced through the integration of multicultural education in the school's curriculum, and the multiculturation of the school environment. Such an approach will achieve the balance between the school's input and its desired educational outcomes. For this approach to be successful, it must be multidisciplinary and multicultural.

For many years, there has been a benign neglect of cultural differences in schools. This has led to victimizing students of color because of the mismatch between learning and teaching situations. In other words, educational practices have not been appealing to the educational needs of diverse populations (Chisholm, 1994; Nieto, 1996), and many language minority students have been set to failure (Banks, 1995; Grant, 1995). As far as learning and teaching are concerned, Swisher (1992) argues that schools generally adapt to

the analytical or field-independent learners, thus depriving students from doing well because of such incongruence. However, while students have to adjust to schools, they "should not have to bear sole responsibility for adapting or changing" (Swisher, 1992, p. 76).

Therefore, schools should be sensitive to and adapt to learners' differences in an effort to provide conditions conducive to learning and meaningful intercultural communication. Otherwise, "a lock-step educational program guarantees that many will be locked out of that best education. 'Nothing is more unequal than the equal treatment of unequals.' Sameness of education for all guarantees educational inequity for many" (Cortes, 1990, p. 14). Thus, participants in the communicative process should become more sensitive to the multifaceted nature of educational and social institutions.

Recognizing this potential for cultural conflicts, Storti (1989), in his book *The Art of Crossing Cultures*, has broken new ground in the study of culture shock as he focuses on the basic psychological processes involved. Although his book is intended for all those going abroad, for various reasons including studying, whose circumstances require them to interact effectively with the host people, his discussion has direct implications to teachers. While encountering a foreign culture and adapting to it, Storti (1989) suggested a multicultural model for encountering the culture straight-on, managing the temptation to withdraw, and gradually adjusting expectations to fit behavior to fit the reality of the culture. By the same token, teachers in today's diverse classrooms, can thwart cultural incongruence by adapting to various cultural expectations in the communicative process.

A multicultural approach to communication requires congruity among diverse cultural communication modes. Although this can be achieved in many ways, the following guidelines provide teachers with implications relevant communication needs in a multicultural setting:

1. Understanding the linguistically and culturally diverse learners along with the sociocultural context of learning and teaching;
2. Being flexible in terms of the contextual demands of learning and teaching situations;
3. Enticing the learner's cultural schemata through active participation of all learners and self-disclosure activities;
4. Utilizing all levels of intelligence through considering various modes of instruction that appeal to the learner's senses, cognitive, and social skills;
5. Assessing students' preferred ways of communicating and learning by using formal and informal techniques;
6. Encouraging cooperative learning and sharing of experiences so that students are exposed to the communication and learning styles of their peers in the class;
7. Empathizing with the learners by communicating efficiently with students in terms of their cultural orientations;
8. Encouraging acculturation of students while maintaining pride in their cultural identity and self-concept;
9. Creating an anxiety-free and culture-friendly environment through considering the physical and affective domains that value and celebrate diversity;
10. Deliberate delivering of content in a variety of ways to make it more comprehensible and meaningful to all students;
11. Working with parents and maintaining a cultural and educational continuity between home and school.

To achieve their role as cultural mediators and effective communicators, teachers should possess several competencies to cultivate cultural diversity. Banks (1994)

delineates several multicultural traits for teachers in the pluralistic society. According to Banks (1994, p.251), teachers must have democratic attitudes and values, a clarified pluralistic ideology, a process conceptualization of ethnic studies, the ability to view society from diverse ethnic perspectives and points of view, knowledge of the emerging stages of ethnicity, and knowledge of the complex nature of ethnicity in Western societies. Having these characteristics help teachers function and communicate effectively in pluralistic environments. Consequently, teachers having these traits will "reach a state of *additive multiculturalism* also may enjoy advantages over monoculturals, including a broader view of reality . . . and multicultural flexibility" (Nieto, 1996, p.347).

In conclusion, the role of teachers in today's diverse classroom has to be revisited in light of pluralizing the school's culture. Teachers must cultivate the unique diversity in the classroom and communicate in a proactive manner that values and celebrates students' differences. They also should demonstrate flexibility and empathy in the interactional process to create a culturally congruent ambiance in the learning teaching context.

Finally, assessing the communicative process in terms of multiculturalism provides teachers with key elements in the success of all students. It also provides new directions and foundations in the augmentation of progress in student learning and self-esteem.

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